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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: President Asad's interview with al-Hayat, Palestinian Territories, Iraq (6/27)

¶1. Summary: All Syrian papers published President Asad's comprehensive interview with London-based al-Hayat about developments in the region. On impressions regarding retreat of the Arab role in the region, in the face of the growing Iranian role, President Asad said: "We have to define whether the Arab role still exists or not," I don't think we have seen an important Arab role except in form" he added.

Asad said that, in most of the Syrian political discourse, he has "called for dialogue, especially with America," but "so far this Administration does not look capable" of conducting such a dialogue. He denied any rupture with France and said it has to do only with President Jacques Chirac.

Asad denied any substantial conflict with Jordan. "There are views in politics that can differ," he said. He said Syria is ready to "give any possible assistance" to facilitate withdrawing the "occupation forces from Iraq." Hamas, he said, must be given a chance to conduct an internal dialogue.

He confirmed that Damascus' doors "remain open" for Premier Fouad Siniora, MP Saad Hariri and MP Michel Aoun. "Syria has welcomed Siniora's visit twice but he didn't come," he said, adding that Syria has no personal problems with Hariri, and Damascus' doors are open for Aoun. "We used to have troubled relations with Aoun ... but now he doesn't attempt to attack Syria, and on some points he defends it," Asad said. He added that Syria had proposed establishing diplomatic ties with Lebanon a long time ago, but "we refuse to bow to pressure."

End of summary.

¶2. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad says in a comprehensive interview to London-based al-Hayat: Syria is ready to provide assistance for the departure of occupation forces from Iraq. What we care about is Palestinian unity. Takfiri groups are directly linked with events in Iraq. The reform process goes ahead with great strides; the economic situation is the priority. Dialogue with US must be direct" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 6/27)

"Lebanese calls to protect the resistance and reshuffle the cabinet. Lahoud: There are schemes to divide Lebanon and impose settlement of Palestinian refugees" (Government-owned Tishreen, 6/27)

"Israeli PM Olmert orders his forces to get ready to invade the Gaza Strip. Palestinians: Releasing Israel soldier is conditional on releasing Palestinian prisoners" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 6/27)

"Olmert threatens to assassinate Khaled Mashaal" (Government-owned Tishreen, 6/27)

"Vice President Al-Hashimi: The US project in Iraq has failed. The occupation seeks a way of salvation. The Arab League calls on Iraqis to give a chance to the national reconciliation initiative" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 6/27)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"A Visa to Damascus"

Abd-al-Fattah al-Awad, chief editor of government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (6/27): "A visit to Damascus requires a visa of trust and credibility, which some people still do not have...."

"Those who lost the key to Damascus and went to Paris and Washington to search for it will find nothing but further loss. The keys to Damascus have always been in the hands of Syrians. And those who think the Beirut-Damascus road passes through New York have certainly not seen the maps of geography, politics, and logic....

"Those who traveled to capitals of the world in search of anything that would hurt Damascus returned with failure and defeat.... The visit to Damascus is not a lifeline or an exit from the state of bankruptcy of the current that deviated from Lebanon's interests because of whims and personal interests.... At tempts are still being made to harm Syria.... The Syrian people do not believe that those who competed in their efforts to harm Syria are trustworthy....

"Syrian positions are more than clear. The doors of Damascus are still open, but with a visa of trust and credibility. Perhaps the success of the dialogue conference will be the appropriate point for opening the doors to Damascus...."

"That Is Why We Bet on the Palestinian Dialogue"

As'ad Abbud, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (6/27): "We believe that the attack on an Israeli military post south of the Gaza Strip on 25 June is indeed a distinguished operation that will help Palestinians who are holding a dialogue to overcome the political trap. For none of the parties to this dialogue accept that the resistance can be scorned or Palestinian blood be taken lightly. We believe this is true in Fatah's case just as it is true in the case of HAMAS....

"Naturally, I do not impose the resistance option on anyone, and this is a philosophy that the Palestinian brothers greatly helped to teach us. But I assume that all those who are taking part in the dialogue see clearly that the independent Palestinian state cannot become a reality, even on a single inch of Palestine's soil, except through resistance. There is a pressing need for the Palestinian dialogue to succeed.... The resistance is the response and the supporter and justifier of the dialogue. It is primarily a political action, despite its armed military nature....

"The existence and continuation of resistance and its effectiveness in preventing the stability of the occupation is the way to end the occupation...."

"National Alignment"

Omar Jaftali, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, commented (6/27): "The intra-Palestinian dialogue must succeed, in light of the daily Israeli terrorism and the absence of international justice with respect to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.... Whether the Israeli defense minister implements his threat to retaliate for the Gaza attack or not, the open aggression did not need to use the Palestinian response as an excuse. Through their successive governments, the leaders of the occupation have had no objective other than killing and displacing the largest possible number of Palestinians to complete their hostile settlement plan...."

"The delicate situation Palestinians are facing dictates that the means of confrontation be reinforced and that national cohesion be achieved. It also dictates a unified Arab position to support the Palestinians on all levels...."

"The Hadithah Massacre and International Responsibility"

Muhammad Khair al-Jammali, an editorialist in government-owned Al-Thawra, wrote (6/27): "The Hadithah massacre showed the real face of American occupation as an occupation not different in its despotism and ugliness from any other bloody occupation the nations of the earth have known."

"Iraqis, Arabs, and international legal organizations, and indeed the entire world community, must take international legal action and set up an international judicial commission to investigate the massacre and all the crimes of the occupation that are being revealed...."

"All those involved, military and politicians, should be brought before an international tribunal...."

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